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## THE A OF *FATHER*, *RATHER*

That a long as well as a short *a* was heard in ME *father*, *rather* is attested by the PE dialectal forms *sayther*, *rayther*, etc. This long *a* is usually explained as being a result of the general ME tendency to lengthen short vowels in open syllables. However, if we leave *father*, *rather* out of consideration, words in *-ther* certainly show no signs of having been influenced by such a tendency. On the contrary, the termination *-ther* not only succeeded in keeping a preceding short vowel short; it even made a preceding long vowel short, as in *lather*, *mother*, etc. The current explanation is therefore clearly somewhat unsatisfactory, to say the least, and the present paper is an attempt to solve the problem on the basis of an entirely different theory.

Our difficulties are apparently increased (though in reality diminished, as will presently appear) by the fact that neither in the dialects nor in StE have *father* and *rather* developed along scrupulously parallel lines. So far as the dialects are concerned, the following table, based on the material collected in Wright's *Dialect Dictionary*, may serve to indicate the nature and extent of the divergencies. The table is meant to be complete so far as the material at my disposition would allow; the phonetic symbols used are taken from Wright, without change.

	<i>father</i>	<i>rather</i>
Scotland, by geographical divisions		
North-East.....	a, ā, e, ē	è
North-West.....	ē	.....
South-North.....	a, ā	ē
East-Mid.....	æ, è	ē
West-Mid.....	ē	è
South-Mid.....	a, e, ē	.....
South.....	è	è, ē
Scotland, by administrative divisions		
Shetlands.....	æ, e, ē	e
Orkneys.....	e	e
Caithness.....	ē	.....
Inverness.....	a	.....
Buchan.....	ā	è

	<i>father</i>	<i>rather</i>
Scotland (administrative divisions)— <i>Continued</i>		
Aberdeen . . . . .	ā	è
West Forfar . . . . .	ā	ē
East Perth . . . . .	ā	ē
Ayr . . . . .		ē
Lothian . . . . .	æ, ē	
Kirkcudbright . . . . .		ē
Ireland		
Ulster		
In general . . . . .	ə	ə
Antrim . . . . .	e	e
England and Wales		
Northumberland		
North-Northeast . . . . .	e	
Mid-East . . . . .	ā, ē	ē
South-East . . . . .	e, ē	e, ē
South-West . . . . .	a	eə
South . . . . .	a, e	e
Durham		
North . . . . .	a, e, ē, i, iə	
South . . . . .	a	ē
Cumberland		
North . . . . .	a, æ, e	eə, ē
East . . . . .	a	
Mid . . . . .	a	ē
West . . . . .	a	
Westmoreland . . . . .	a	ē
Yorkshire		
North-Northwest . . . . .	a	ā, ē
South-Northwest . . . . .	a	ē
North-East . . . . .	ā	eə, ē
North-Mid . . . . .	a, iə	
Mid . . . . .	iə	eə, iə
East . . . . .	a, ē	eə
South-East . . . . .	a, ē	eə, ē, iə
Mid-South . . . . .	a, eə, ē, ā	
East-South . . . . .	ē	
North . . . . .		eə
South . . . . .	a	
South-West . . . . .	a, ē	eə
Lancashire		
North-West . . . . .	a	eə, ē
North . . . . .	a	ē
Mid . . . . .	a	ē
East-Mid . . . . .	ē	ē
South-Mid . . . . .	a, ē	ē
Mid-South . . . . .		ē
South-West . . . . .	ē	ē
South . . . . .	ē	ē
South-East . . . . .	ei	ē
Isle of Man . . . . .	ā	a

	<i>father</i>	<i>rather</i>
<i>England and Wales—Continued</i>		
Cheshire		
West . . . . .	ī	.....
Mid . . . . .	ē, ī	.....
South . . . . .	ā, ē, ī	ē, ī
Flintshire . . . . .	ē, ī	ē
Denbighshire . . . . .	ē	.....
Staffordshire		
North . . . . .	ei, ē	ei
East . . . . .	ē	.....
East-Mid . . . . .	ei, ē	.....
West-Mid . . . . .	ē	.....
South . . . . .	eə, ē, iə	o
Derbyshire		
In general . . . . .	ē	.....
North-West . . . . .		æ
North . . . . .		ē
East . . . . .		æ
Nottinghamshire . . . . .	ā, ē	.....
Lincolnshire		
North-West . . . . .	ei, eə	eə
North . . . . .	eə, ē	ā, ē
Mid . . . . .	a, eə	ē
South . . . . .	eə	eə, ē
Rutlandshire . . . . .	ā, ē	a, ē
Leicestershire		
In general . . . . .	ā, ē	e, ē, o
North . . . . .	eə	.....
Northamptonshire		
North-East . . . . .	ā	.....
Mid . . . . .	ā, iə, ē	e
South-West . . . . .	ā	.....
Warwickshire		
East . . . . .	ē, iə	æ, e
West . . . . .	ē, iə	iə
South . . . . .	ā, eə	.....
Worcestershire		
North . . . . .	eə, ē	.....
South . . . . .	ē, iə	.....
East . . . . .		e
Shropshire		
North . . . . .	ē	ē
North-East . . . . .	ē, ī	e
Mid . . . . .	a, ē	.....
South-East . . . . .	æ, ē	.....
Herefordshire		
North . . . . .	ē	.....
East . . . . .	ē	.....
Pembrokeshire		
South . . . . .	ē	.....
Gloucestershire . . . . .	æ, ā, iə	.....

	<i>father</i>	<i>rather</i>
<i>England and Wales—Continued</i>		
Oxfordshire		
North-West . . . . .	iə	.....
West . . . . .	ā	ā
East . . . . .	ā	e
Mid . . . . .	.....	e
South . . . . .	ā	ʊ
Buckinghamshire		
In general . . . . .	.....	ē
North . . . . .	ā, ē	.....
Mid . . . . .	æ, ē, iə	.....
Bedfordshire . . . . .	a, ā	ā
Hertfordshire . . . . .	ā	.....
Huntingdonshire . . . . .	ā	.....
Cambridgeshire . . . . .	.....	ē
Norfolk		
In general . . . . .	ā	.....
North-East . . . . .	.....	æ, ē
Suffolk		
East . . . . .	ā	ʊ
West . . . . .	a	.....
Essex . . . . .	ā	ē
Kent		
North . . . . .	ā	.....
East . . . . .	.....	ē
South-East . . . . .	ā	ā
Surrey		
South . . . . .	.....	ā, ē
Sussex		
East . . . . .	eə, iə	ē
West . . . . .	.....	ā, ē
Hampshire		
South-Mid . . . . .	iə	.....
Isle of Wight . . . . .	ē	.....
Wiltshire		
North-West . . . . .	ē	.....
West . . . . .	æ, iə	.....
Mid-East . . . . .	æ	æ
Dorsetshire		
In general . . . . .	æ	ā
East . . . . .	ā, æ, ē	.....
Somersetshire		
In general . . . . .	ā	.....
North-West . . . . .	ē	ē
East . . . . .	a	.....
Devonshire		
In general . . . . .	ā	.....
North . . . . .	ā	ē
East . . . . .	.....	eə
South-West . . . . .	.....	ʊ

In standard speech *father* is now universally pronounced with a long vowel—[aː]. The origin of this [aː] is as obscure as is the origin of the ME long. Jespersen, *Mod. Eng. Gram.*, I, 10.67, advances the theory that the present sound goes back to ME [aː]. For a discussion of this theory see W. Horn, *Anglia*, XXXV, 364 ff. Other scholars apparently derive it from an early eighteenth-century [æː], a sound which in its turn had developed (by lengthening) out of an older short *a*. Thus Horn, *loc. cit.*, though he introduces the suggestion cautiously enough (p. 374): "Vielleicht ist aber die möglichkeit doch nicht ganz von der hand zu weisen." It is of course true that short *a* was regularly lengthened before [f, p, s]. There are exceptions even here, however, and when we come to the corresponding voiced spirants we find ourselves on uncertain ground indeed. Such forms as *paths* can hardly be brought forward as evidence, and *raspberry*, with its voiced *s*, is clearly not a case in point. There remain the words in *-ther*, and here, if we assume that there really was a tendency to lengthen a short *a* before [ð], the inconsistencies of present usage are inexplicable. Why did the long sound establish itself completely in *father*, but only partially in *rather* and not at all in *gather*, *lather*?

If it were analogy we were dealing with, these inconsistencies would not trouble us to the same extent. The workings of analogy are rarely thoroughgoing. Tradition may be brought to bay, but the dogs do not escape with whole skins. Thus, even so mighty an instrument of analogy as the English plural in *-s* has never been able to uproot the *-n* of *oxen* or add an *s* to *sheep*. Furthermore, the ways of analogy are often inscrutable. Why, for instance, do we have analogical stress in *deplorable*, *remarkable*, but not in (*ir*)*revocable*, *admirable*, *comparable*? Or why did analogy drive the [g] out of *singer*, but not out of *younger*? Examples might be multiplied indefinitely, but what I have given will suffice to show that analogy sometimes moves in an inconsistent way its changes to perform.

It is my purpose to show that the [aː] of *father*, *rather* first developed in *father*, and thence spread, by analogy, to *rather*. If we accept Jespersen's theories as to PE [aː], we may suppose that the [aː] under discussion established itself once for all in ME times. If we adhere to the [æː > aː] hypothesis (which will be my working basis in

the following discussion), we must look upon the ME and the eighteenth-century lengthenings as mutually independent developments, the parallelism of which is due to the fact that in each case the same principle of phonetic change was at work. What this principle was becomes obvious enough when we read Granville Sharp's *A Short Treatise on the English Tongue* (London, 1767). Sharp is an orthoëpist who, so far as I am aware, has never got a hearing in Anglistic circles. I hope to be able to bring out at some future time a complete analysis of his pronunciation, on the basis of the *Treatise* named above. Here, however, I shall deal primarily with his statements concerning the pronunciation of the letter *a*.

Sharp calls long *a* (i.e., the *a* of *fate*, etc.) "the English *a*," because this value of the letter seems peculiar to English. Similarly with *e* and *i*. On page 3 he gives the following rule: "The English (or long) sound is given to the vowels *a*, *e*, and *i* . . . when they are alone, or when there is not a consonant following them in the same syllable. . . ." On page 5 we find exceptions to this rule: "Except . . . in *Fa-ther*, and the last syllable of *Pa-pa*, *Mam-ma*, wherein it has a medium sound between *aw* and the English *a*. . . ." This "medium sound" was clearly either [æ] or [a'], presumably the latter, since the words in question are listed under *a=aw* in the index. However, the exact quality of the vowel need not concern us at this point. Just now we are interested primarily in Sharp's *identification* of the three *a*'s. This identification we find also in such good authorities as Sheridan (1780), Nares (1784), and Walker (1791), so that we are thoroughly justified in assuming the correctness of Sharp's statement. The next step, therefore, is to look into the history of *father*, *mamma*, *papa* to see if we can discover some explanation for the parallelism of their development.

*Mamma* occurs twice in sixteenth-century monuments (Eden, 1555, *Decades*, p. 44; Lyly, 1579, *Euphues*, ed. *Arber.*, p. 129), but thereafter it disappears from the literary language for over a century (*NED*). Its restoration (ca. 1680) to standard speech is usually attributed to French influence, and this explanation is supported by the fact that the literary word, from the time of its revival to the present day, has always had ultima stress (*NED*). It may even be argued that not only the stress but the whole word may have been

borrowed from the French. The final vowel would in that case of course have lost its nasalization in the mouths of English children, and would have become a wide [ɔ̃] to begin with, since *aw*<sup>1</sup> was in those days the regular substitution for French (and German) *a*. The existence of such a pronunciation is directly attested by Shadwell's rhyme *mamma : awe* (*NED*), and by the PE vulgar *paw*, *maw*, formerly in widespread use and frequently heard to this day (in the United States at least). However, we need not assume a French origin for this [ɔ̃]. A native word *mama*, even if it had never before existed, might have been created any day in the nursery, and the stressed vowel of a seventeenth-century nursery-made or -remodeled *mama* would have been [ɔ̃] or [æ̃] rather than [ã]. The open vowels baby produces are usually more like [a] than anything else, it is true, but the important thing is not what baby says (the fact of the matter is, he doesn't say anything; he merely makes meaningless noises<sup>2</sup>), but what the fond parents think he says. Baby's noises are therefore always interpreted in terms of the parents' sound system, modified by the influence of tradition. Thus the traditional labials expected—and consequently heard—are *p* and *m*. We do not hear *b* because there was no initial *b* in Indo-European. Furthermore, since there was no such sound as [a, ã] in late seventeenth-century and early eighteenth-century English, baby's open vowels were interpreted as [æ] in South Carolina nurseries (whence the present-day South Carolina forms [pæ, mæ]<sup>3</sup>), but elsewhere, apparently, as [ɔ̃]. This [ɔ̃] developed also in *father*, as attested by Jones, 1701 (Ekwall's reprint, p. 29),<sup>4</sup> König's *Wegweiser*, 1706 (Driedger, p. 51), and König's *Grammatica*, 1715 (Driedger, *loc. cit.*). That is to say, baby's *fa-fa-fa*, etc., was interpreted as [fɔ̃], largely, no doubt, because of the powerful analogy of (*pa*)*pa*, (*mam*)*ma*. The reverse process (i.e., the influence of the [æ] of *father* on the vowel of

<sup>1</sup> See almost any orthoëpist of the period; further, cf. PE vulgar [vəʔ] *vase* (a pronunciation formerly in excellent standing—regularly used by Ellis, for instance), the proper names *Chicago*, *Arkansas*, the phrase *with a claw*, vulgar for *with éclat* (Jespersen, I, 9.96), and the word *mardigras* [ma'digrõ] 'carnival' (current in the southern part of the United States).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Jespersen's *Børnesproget*.

<sup>3</sup> See Sylvester Primer, *Phonetische Studien*, I (1888), 235.

<sup>4</sup> Jones says "*father*, &c." I take the "&c" to mean *mamma*, *papa*. Neither of these words is equipped with a *th*, it is true, but this means only that Jones has bungled things—as usual. See further Ekwall's Introduction, § 98.



*ma*, *pa*) may partly account for the South Carolina development; certainly the analogy of the short vowel in *fa-* must have been the decisive factor in the development of [æ] rather than [æ̃] in the other two words. I may add that I have rarely heard the [æ] of *pa*, *ma* pronounced as a genuine short vowel; it is usually half-long, I should say.

The use of a short or half-long [æ] in words of this character is not unknown to StE; witness *dad*, *daddy*, *mammy*. Of the particular words under consideration, however, only *father* can be shown to have possessed a short *a* in standard eighteenth-century speech, and this short *a* goes back, of course, to pre-Germanic times. Even for *father*, indeed, the evidence is perhaps not quite conclusive. The most definite thing I have been able to find is contained, unfortunately enough, in Theodor Arnold's (1736) *Grammatica Anglicana Concentrata*, one of the most unsatisfactory grammars ever compiled. Arnold's work contains, among other things, "phonetic" transcriptions of the Lord's Prayer, the Gloria, etc. In the passages transcribed the word *father* occurs eight times; in every case it is respelled *fäther*. This seems definite enough, but as a matter of fact the symbol *ä* is ambiguous; Arnold often uses it to indicate the *a* of *face*, etc., though his usual symbol for that sound is *äh*. To make matters worse, the plural *fathers*, which occurs once in the passages transcribed, is respelled with *a* instead of *ä*. Here, however, we may safely assume, I think, that the failure of the umlaut sign to appear was due simply to an oversight. It is also highly improbable that Arnold was familiar with the dialectal *fayther*—his grammar was "made in Germany," and certainly reveals no intimate acquaintance with English pronunciation—so on the whole *fäther* may safely be taken at its face value.

We have seen that baby's open vowels were interpreted as [æ] in South Carolina. They might perhaps even better have been interpreted as [æ̃], however, and there is some evidence that this interpretation of them actually took place in StE. Sheridan's 1780 <sup>1</sup>ä in *fäther*, *papä*<sup>1</sup>, *mammä*<sup>1</sup> must have been a long vowel (Ellis labels it ææ), and Buchanan (1766) records the same sound for *father*, if Ellis' lists are to be trusted. What Sheridan says is worth giving in full; I quote from page 59 of his *Rhetorical Grammar* ("prefixed" to his

*General Dictionary of the English Language*). He says: "When the vowel, *a*, finishes a syllable, and has the accent on it, it is invariably pronounced  $\overset{2}{a}$  (day) by the English. To this rule there are but three exceptions in the whole language, to be found in the words, *fáther*, *pápá*, *mamá*. The Irish may think also the word *rather* an exception . . . but in the English pronunciation the consonant, *th*, is taken into the first syllable, as thus, *rath'-er*, which makes the difference." Sheridan distinguishes three *a*-sounds:  $\overset{1}{a}$  (as in *fat*),  $\overset{2}{a}$  (as in *fate*), and  $\overset{3}{a}$  (as in *fall*). He indicates *shortness* (in a stressed syllable) by putting the stress mark after the following consonant instead of after the vowel itself. Here he makes it perfectly clear that *father* and *rather* are not to be pronounced alike, and since he nevertheless gives them both with  $\overset{1}{a}$  there seems to be no escape from the conclusion that the *a* in the stressed syllable of *father*, *papa*, *mamma* was for him a lengthened [æ].

This is perhaps the best place to discuss J. B. Rogler's edition (1784) of Arnold's *Vollständig kleines Wörterbuch, Englisch und Deutsch*. I use Rogler rather than Arnold (1761) or Klausing's Arnold (1771) because the last two respell only a certain proportion of the words they give, while Rogler respells every word listed. All three dictionaries—or rather editions—exhibit the same peculiarity, viz., an astounding inconsistency in their respellings. Here are a few examples from Rogler; the respellings are inclosed in round brackets: *father* (*fahther*), *mamma* (*mämmäh*), *papa* (*pähpä*); *palm* (*pahm*), *psalm* (*sähm*), *balm* (*bähm*), *calm* (*kahm*); *half* (*hahf*), *halve* (*hähv*); *large* (*lahrdsch*), *barge* (*bährdsch*); *master* (*mähst'r*), *plaster* (*plässt'r*); *far* (*fähr*), *tar* (*tärr*); *haunch* (*hänntsch*), *launch* (*lahntsch*). All this can have but one meaning (for we have here something worse than mere muddling). The sound-change [æ > a] was at that time evidently in full course, bringing in its train a diversity of usage which must have bewildered our lexicographers. As to *father*, *mamma*, *papa*, the shift of stress in *papa* was not uncommon in the eighteenth century (see the *NED*). The *äh* of *papa*, *mamma* confirms Sheridan, and the contrasted *ah* of *father* is only typical of the general confusion which then prevailed.

We are now in a position to explain the origin of the PE [a'] in our three words. The basis was the Shadwell-Jones [ǣ'], which (to

judge from Sheridan and Buchanan) had undergone, in some nurseries at least, a remodeling to [æ']. It is reasonably certain that a third pronunciation, with [æ], existed in *father*, and, in view of present South Carolina usage, this pronunciation may perhaps be assumed also for *mamma*, *papa*. The various pronunciations in question, all current at the same time, must have made usage unsettled and thus facilitated the general leveling which took place in the second half of the century. It cannot be too strongly emphasized that the three *a*'s under discussion are not theoretical creations of mine; they are all recorded in our monuments, or in present usage, or in both, and the fact of their actual existence in the mouths of eighteenth-century speakers cannot successfully be challenged. Of the three, [æ'] would develop phonetically to [a']; the other two either were simply leveled under this [a'] or else underwent nursery-remodeling, a process which would give the same result. For it is obvious enough that the normal form the nursery variety of the words would take is the form with [a']. The development of this form had hitherto been hindered by the non-existence in standard speech of such a sound as [a'], but after the sound-change [æ' > a'] had begun, this hindrance was removed, the natural tendencies were given free play, and results quickly followed. The first *beleg* I have been able to find is that recorded in Theodor Arnold's *Vollständiges Englisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch* (Leipzig und Züllichau, 1761). Arnold's respelling for *father* is *fahther*; his respelling for *rather* is, on the other hand, *rätther*. The same respellings are given in the edition of 1771 (edited by A. E. Klausning) and in the abridged edition of 1784 (Rogler's *Kleines Wörterbuch*, discussed above). These transcriptions of *father* are to be compared with our same Arnold's *fäther* in 1736 (see above). Of the native orthoëpists I have already cited Sharp (1767). According to Nares (1784) *a* was pronounced [a'] in *mamma*, *papa*, *father*, *rath*, etc. (to mention only those words pertinent here). "Not so," he adds (p. 6) in a note to *rath*, "its derivative *rather*." As he has nothing further to say on the subject we are left in doubt as to whether his *a* in *rather* was [æ] or [e']. Fortunately enough, though, Walker clears up the matter for us in a note appended to the article on *rather* in his *Critical Pronouncing Dictionary of the English Language* (I am using the edition of 1797).

He says: "Some very respectable speakers pronounce this word with the first syllable like that in *Rā-ven*; and Mr. Nares has adopted this pronunciation. Dr. Ash and Bailey seem to be of the same opinion; but all the other orthoëpists, from whom we can certainly know the quantity of the vowel, as Mr. Sheridan, Mr. Elphinston, Mr. Scott, Dr. Kendrick, W. Johnston, Mr. Perry, Buchanan, and Entick, make it short." He himself gives both pronunciations, indicating his preference by putting the [æ]-form first. He knows only [a'], however, in *father*, *mamma*, *papa*. This distinction between *father* and *rather* is maintained far into the nineteenth century. The following table, based partly on the variant pronunciations of *rather* recorded in Noah Webster's dictionary (London editions of 1831 and 1864), may serve to indicate the situation for the greater part of the century. The works listed are all dictionaries. The works are referred to by giving names of editors and dates of publication. The two American dictionaries, Webster's and Worcester's, are not listed; both of these, of course, give *rather* with [æ], which is still the usual American pronunciation.

1. [æ]: W. Perry, 1802 and 1805  
           W. Scott, 1815  
           G. Fulton and G. Knight, 1802 and 1833  
           J. Walker, 1806 and 1826 (preferred pronunciation)  
           Davenport's Walker, 1831 (preferred pronunciation)  
           Smart's Walker, 1857  
           A. J. Cooley, 1863
2. [e']: S. Jones, 1806  
           J. Walker, 1806 and 1826 (alternative pronunciation)  
           Davenport's Walker, 1831 (alternative pronunciation)
3. [a']: J. Jameson, 1827  
           J. Knowles, 1835  
           R. S. Jameson, 1850  
           R. Cull, 1864

Although this list includes all the dictionaries I have access to, it is of course not exhaustive, and an earlier [a']-*beleg* may some day be unearthed. There seems to be no doubt, however, that the [a'] of *rather* is, in marked contrast to that of *father*, a strictly nineteenth-century product, and as such it can be explained only as an analogical development. The analogy failed to establish itself in America

because it did not have sufficient support; if we leave out of consideration the region east of the Connecticut River, [a·] does not occur in American English except in foreign words, in interjections, in the words *father*, *papa*, *mamma*, before *r*, and before the bilabial consonant [m]. In England, however, where the sound is used much more widely, occurring even before [ð] in such plurals as *paths*, the analogical form, after a half-century or more of wavering, finally superseded the historical one. For Scotland see *NED*. Wyld's pronunciation of *lather* with [a·] indicates that this word is now coming under the influence of the same analogy.

I conceive the ME long forms to have originated in a similar way. Once introduced, the long seems to have completely driven out the short in the case of *rather* (except, of course, in the standard dialect). Only two modern dialects, those of Rutlandshire and the Isle of Man, use a vowel which can be derived from the ME short, and even here we probably have borrowing from StE. Not so with *father*, the pronunciation of which was liable to be affected by nursery influences. When long *a* became a front vowel the nursery began to look with favor upon the hitherto neglected short, which thereupon quickly regained currency in those dialects (including Standard English) which as yet had not completely discarded it. The influence of neighboring dialects, and especially of standard speech, must also have played a part from the very beginning; indeed, some of the variants we get are explainable only as borrowings. To sum up: the PE dialectal equivalents of the *a* of *rather* represent in most cases ME long *a*, in the remaining cases either a sound developed by analogy or else a sound borrowed from another dialect (usually Standard English); the PE dialectal equivalents of the *a* of *father* represent in many cases ME long or short *a* unmodified by nursery influences, in many cases ME long or short *a* modified by nursery influences, in the remaining cases a sound borrowed from Standard English or some other dialect.

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